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The Journey of a Navy Medicine Resident

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For me, “making it count” means travel and doing something active that would leave me physically and mentally ready to start taking care of patients in my residency. I

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commissioned into the Navy through the [Health Professions Scholarship Program \(HPSP\)](#) because I wanted to travel, stay physically active, and serve my country with a scalpel or a stethoscope, rather than a rifle like most of my friends in the service.



You see, prior to joining the Navy, I had traveled to 22 countries as a civilian. Most of these trips were accomplished through study abroad programs, including Semester at Sea where I circumnavigated the globe (except for the Panama Canal) by ship visiting 10 countries on four continents along the way. This made the Navy a natural fit as I love being on the open ocean. I thought this time I should see more of my own country ... and what better way than from the seat of a bicycle ... I mean it beats walking right?

I started training for my ride in October by riding five to 10 miles a day. My plan was to increase this slowly by about 10 miles a month until April when I would leave.

I also started telling all my friends and family about my plan so that I'd be letting all of them down as well as myself if I backed out (... nothing like a little peer pressure to keep you motivated). Unfortunately, due to weather in Illinois, most of my training was done on a stationary bike at the gym, so I was very excited when March Madness came around as 60 miles on a bike was taking me about four hours.

On April 12, I flew from Illinois to Virginia and started my adventure west. I don't think I realized at that point just what I had gotten myself into. You see, to get my bike to Virginia I had to have a local bike shop disassemble my bike and put it in a box to get it on the plane. I didn't realize just how many pieces it would be in when I got there. However, using the USO as a base of operation and YouTube as an instruction guide, I quickly got my bike assembled.

The first few days of my trip were rough going and a bit of trial and error. Figuring out how my gear needed to be balanced on my bike so it didn't cause me to tip over (six times on the first day alone) was the first lesson. Clipping my shoes into and out of my bike pedals was the next one. I'm sure I received many a strange look when I would roll up to a traffic light, stop sign or any other place I had to stop and then tip over because I couldn't get my feet unclipped from the pedals. Not to worry though, I think I bruised my pride more than I injured myself.

I also had three flat tires the first three days and though I'd practiced changing them at home, there is something very different about being broken down on the side of the road with cars racing by or on a back country road where you can only hope someone will come by if you are in need of help. This process taught me not to get myself into something I can't get myself out of and also to think creatively to solve the many problems I encountered.

In Virginia, I encountered more mountains than I've ever seen. In Kentucky, I was chased by coal trucks, but also greeted warmly by the locals and invited to join in an impromptu bluegrass jam session. In Illinois, I saw old friends I'd played volleyball with years ago. In Missouri, I met a married couple that had ridden coast to coast as a family towing along their two and four year old children. I also experienced the latest snow fall in recorded history in Missouri ... let's just say it's not as fun on a bicycle. In Kansas, I headed due west, not even seeing so much as a traffic light for more than 300 miles. Then in Colorado, I tackled the Rockies. It was a slow and steady climb to a high of 13,112 feet going over Lizard's Head Mountain. Then it was mostly downhill until canyons of Utah. I went around the Grand Canyon (because apparently you can't ride a bicycle up and down it) in 110 degree heat. Finally, I rolled to the ocean in San Diego where there just happened to be a guy playing the

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bag pipes.



All told, I covered more than 3,700 miles in 45 days. It isn't the distance, the bad weather, or the flat tires I'll remember, but the people I met along the way. Too often I heard that this trip wasn't safe, but everywhere I went people went out of their way to be kind. Some let me stay in their home or church, while others gave me food or water when I was running low.

Along the way and since finishing, many people have asked me, "What made you want to do this?" Two memorable quotes stand out as a response. The first by Roberto Pena, a fellow cross country cyclist I came across in Colorado said, "Someday, a period will be put at the end of the story of my life. I'd rather mine be filled with stories of what I did than the dreams I only thought of." The second by Mark Twain sums up why I love to travel and what I think others can get out of venturing to new places, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the Earth all one's lifetime."

Editor's note: Parenteau is from (Sunnyvale, Calif), he graduated from Fremont High School in 2002, received a degree in psychobiology with an education studies minor from UCLA in 2006, received his M.D., J.D. from Southern Illinois University in 2013, and commissioned as a Navy doctor through the Navy's Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP). He hopes to serve out in the fleet next year as an undersea medical officer or flight surgeon before finishing his residency in urology and then obtain an assignment overseas in the U.S. Navy. Time aboard the USNS Comfort or USNS Mercy, the Navy's Military Sealift Command's hospital ships, would be a capstone to his career.

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